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Author(s): Farzaneh Milani
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Farzaneh Milani

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THE WORD FOR GUILE (*KAYD*) ITSELF SEEMS TO BE SHIFTY.[1] SOMETIMES IT IS positive, sometimes negative, at times divine. It seems to assume its significance from its context. It becomes positive or negative according to the point of view of the one who uses it. It has a variety of meanings: Steingass's listing "deceiving, laying snares, entrapping. plotting mischief; applying a remedy, vomiting; being menstruous; the croak of a raven; war, warfare; deceit, fraud, stratagem; treachery, malignity, malice" illustrates its large semantic field.[2] *Kayd* can also be a divine attribute. In the Qur'anic chapter in which the Egyptian ruler admonishes his wife and utters the often repeated verse 29, "Indeed your guile is great," verse 76 links *kayd* with God who "did devise a plan for Joseph." "There are at least thirty-four uses of the Arabic root K.Y.D in the Qur'an, and a number of them refer to God's action."[3]

Some of the most admired heroes and heroines of Persian literature are guileful. Most writers, however, have formulated their paradigms of guile with women in mind. *Kayd* and its numerous synonyms, although not gendered words, are frequently "feminized." It is often associated with the natural, or at least the socialized, woman. Few writers have claimed that only women are cunning, but many have readily assumed a connection between femininity and guile. Frequently, when a treacherous woman is introduced in a text, the narrator leaves the plot to intervene, to draw a lesson, to educate the reader. In these interstices, many authors argue that all women are tricky and untrustworthy. Superimpose the traits of one guileful woman upon any woman, they seem to suggest, and you will find another latent example of womanly guile waiting to manifest

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Farzaneh Milani is Associate Professor of Persian and Women's Studies, University of Virginia.

1. This paper was first presented at the Second Biennial Conference on Iranian Studies. A different version, titled "The Politics and Poetics of Sex-Segregation," is forthcoming in *Discourse on Gender/Gendered Discourse in the Middle East*, ed. Boaz Shoshan. Through the years I have benefited from the comments and criticism of many friends and colleagues. Kaveh Safa, with his customary generosity of spirit, has been a major source of enlightenment. Afsaneh Najmabadi has offered invaluable suggestions on various permutations of this paper. I am also most grateful to Shahla Haeri, Debbie McDowell, Janet Beizer, Ann Lane, Barbara Nolan, Virginia Germino, Boaz Shoshan, Bella Depaulo, Bahiyyih Nakhjavani, and Abbas Milani for their many helpful comments.

2. F Steingass, *Persian-English Dictionary*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977).

3 Shalom Goldman, *The Wiles of Women/The Wiles of Men* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), 48.

itself. The generalization from one particular woman to all women is swift and unproblematic. Witness ᶜAziz of Egypt decry the deceitful nature of his wife, Zulaykha, citing her as evidence of the fraudulent nature of all women:

> Then he heaped reproaches on that treacherous woman: "I should have known that this was one of your tricks; and that it was your idea to have this excellent youth imprisoned. Truly that was a perfidious deed—and so harmful to yourself!—to stray from the path of honor and good repute and go running after your own slave! Not only were you quite content to commit such a foul deed, but then you cast the blame on him! Truly, female guile is heartbreaking.[4]

There is indeed no shortage of such authorial interventions in Persian literature. After portraying Sudabah as a vindictive and wicked stepmother whose mind is "a mass of jostling schemes,"[5] Firdawsi, in the midst of the legend of Siyavash, takes a moment to remind his readers that she, in fact, is no exception to the rule:

> (All our privations come from women's wiles,
> And if you hear this story to the end
> you'll see it's best that you believe this fact.)[6]

The wily female characters of Persian literature have their counterparts in religion and folklore. In Zoroastrian cosmogony, Jahi, better known as Jeh, manages to trick Ahriman who, after lying prostrate for 3,000 years, shatters the existing ideal order.[7] Eve, in Iranian popular belief, fares not much better than Jeh. As the temptress and the seducer, she is viewed as the prototype of womanly guile. She carries the burden of responsibility for tricking Adam and causing their subsequent expulsion from paradise. The mother of mankind, she is also the mother of their misery. In the Qurʾanic story of creation, however, the loss of paradisical life is not brought about by her. Adam and Eve are tempted together.[8] Satan murmurs suggestions to them both, and "So the two of them

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4. ᶜAbd al-Rahman Jami, "Yusuf wa Zulaykha," [Yusuf and Zulaykha] in *Masnavi-ye Haft Awrang*, ed. Mortaza Modaress Gilani (Teheran: Sa'di, 1958), 90. Ralph T.H. Griffith (London: Trubner & Co., 1882) and David Pendlebury (London: Octagon Press, 1980) have translated this beautiful tale into English. Auguste Bricteux (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1927) has translated it into French. For a brilliant and thorough analysis of different versions of this most popular tale see Gayane Karen Merguerian and Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Zulaykha and Yusuf: Whose 'Best Story'?" *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. 29, no. 4 (November 1997).

5. Firdawsi, *The Legend of Seyavash*, trans. Dick Davis (England: Penguin Books 1992), 18.

6. Ibid., 27.

7. See "Who is Jahika?" Katayoun Mazdapour, *One Thousand and One Nights' Delilah the Trickster*, new revised edition, (Teheran: Rowshangaran, 1995).

8. In Sura 7:19 Satan whispers to both Adam and Eve, and in Sura 20:118 "Satan whispered to him saying, 'Adam, shall I point thee to the Tree of Eternity, and a

ate of it."[9] Disobeying the divine commandment, they are both equally responsible for their fall. Tempted together, they are equally guilty of sinning; both are equally punished by God, and both are equally forgiven when they repent. Eve is exonerated from her charge of sole culpability in the Qur'an. She is neither the first sinner nor the eternal deceiver. In tradition and popular narratives, however, the primordial woman is held accountable for cajoling her husband. She remains the schemer. Even her name, which means "mother of all the living," is associated with the "Serpent-Mother." She is accused of giving Adam "bad advice, and the word play completes the circle of her conspiring with Satan: Hawwa (Eve) = Hawa (adviser) = Haywa (Serpent)."[10]

The indictment of women as cunning is frequently restated in various discourses.[11] Its uncanny reiteration is a token of its pervasiveness and deeply ingrained nature. The two mythic kings in the frame story of *The Thousand and One Nights* come to the frightening realization that even the jinn are powerless before womanly guile. We can still hear them scream in unison: "Allah. Allah. Indeed, women's guile is great." Centuries later, Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi repeats the same verdict. In an interview with Oranio Fallaci, he quickly crossed continents and centuries, transcended geographical and temporal boundaries, and generalized from a few women in the world of politics to all women at all times and all places. "All I can say is that women, when they govern, are much harsher than men. Much crueler. Much more bloodthirsty. I'm citing facts, not opinions. You're heartless when you have power. Think of Catherine de Médicis, Catherine of Russia, Elizabeth I of England. Not to mention your Lucrezia Borgia, with her poisons and intrigues. You're schemers, you're evil. All of you."[12]

The feminization of wile is not unique to Iranian culture. Lady Murasaki dedicated a whole chapter of one of the world's earliest and greatest novels to "wiles of women."[13] Rousseau believed "This peculiar cleverness given to the fair sex is a very equitable compensation for their lesser share of strength, a compensation without which woman would be not man's companion but his slave."[14] Mary Wollstonecraft observed in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* that servility in women produces a propensity to "govern their tyrants

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Kingdom that decays not?'" *The Koran Interpreted*, trans. Arthur Arberry (New York: Collier, 1995).

9. *The Koran Interpreted*, 20:119.

10. John A. Phillips, *Eve: The History of an Idea* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984), 165.

11. In *Beyond the Veil*, Fatima Mernissi writes: "The whole Muslim organization of social interactions and spatial configurations can be understood in terms of the woman's *qaid* power ["The power to deceive and defeat men, not by force, but by cunning and intrigue"]. The social order then appears as an attempt to subjugate her power and neutralize its disruptive effects" (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1975), 5.

12. Oranio Fallaci, *Interview With History*, trans. John Shepley (Boston: Houghton, 1977), 272.

13. Murasaki Shikubu, et al, *Tale of Genji* (New York: Random House, 1983).

14. (*Emile*, V. 371)

by sinister tricks."[15] Maureen Dowd, at the threshold of the twenty-first century, maintains that "Women have learned, through long years of being subordinated to men in the workplace, to use their wiles and wits to maneuver past eruptions of male libido."[16] Guile, a human trait, seems to be more abundant, or perhaps more noticeable, in women. In the words of Aristotle, women are "more jealous, more querulous, more apt to scold and strike. . . more void of shame and self-respect, more false of speech, more deceptive."[17] Femininity has become almost synonymous with trickery. "A woman doesn't have to tell the truth," writes Shahrnoush Parsipour in *The Dog and the Long Winter*, "because she is a woman. That is her nature."[18] Even a gender-bending poet such as Forugh Farrokhzad, in a poem titled "Confession," speaks of her own blurring of the distinctions between truth and falsehood. Jumping from the particular to the general, from a personal confession to a collective notion, she refers to the female capacity for treachery.

O, don't ever believe
my heart is one with my tongue.
All I said were lies, a pack of lies
I never told you what I desired.
. . . . .
You must have heard it,
women say yes in their heart but have no on their lips,
they never reveal their frailty,
they're secretive, reticent, guileful. [19]

Men's guile, on the other hand, seems to grow from obvious cleverness and creativity. It often leads to positive results. Feminine wile is said to be a dangerous weapon. It is equated with covert tactics, with disguise and duplicity. It is sneaky rather than a sign of mental agility and wisdom. It is sexual and emotional manipulation rather than imaginative strategy, ruse rather than artful intelligence. One is the feline power of the powerless, the other is the ingenious power of the powerful. Yusuf, for instance, who plays a number of tricks on his own brothers in Egypt and others, is described lovingly by his most passionate admirer, Zulaykha, as amassing "nothing but sly and underhand tricks."[20] Other heroes, too, do not hesitate to pull a trick or two to save the day. "The ability to trick the enemy," Dick Davis tells us, is one of the overt values *Shāhnāmah* promotes. As a matter of fact, "the epithet of one of the heroes is the equivalent

15. Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, (New York: Norton, 1967), 218.

16. Maureen Dowd, "Libido Games," *New York Times*, March 18, 1998, A27.

17. Aristotle, *Works of Aristotle* ed. Ross, vol. 4, ed. J.A. Smith and W.D. Ross (Oxford:Clarendon Press, 1910), 9.1.608b.

18. Shahrnoush Parsipour, *Sag va Zimistan Buland* [The Dog and the Long Winter] (Teheran: Amir Kabir, 1976), 156.

19. Forugh Farrokhzad, *Wall* (Teheran: Amir Kabir, 1971), 70.

20. *Yūsuf wa Zulaykha*, 84.

of Odysseus' 'guileful.'"[21] These heroes, however, are not presented as run-of-the-mill liars and crooks. Their cunning is not portrayed as masculine. Often it is justified, even valorized. And if men have to be portrayed as cunning in its negative sense, the reader is reminded that this is not a part and parcel of manliness (*mardānagī*). When Jami recounts Yusuf's brothers' plot to kill him, to "deceive their father," and to recklessly plunge "headlong into the well of calamity, without ever considering the depths of their treachery," he is quick to meditate on manliness as mutually exclusive with fraudulence. Unlike these villains and evil-doers, the manly men (*javānmardān*), he interjects, "are free from the bondage of self and guile."[22] Similarly, when Islami Nudushan refers to Suhrab's tragic death, he acknowledges that "the father had to resort to tricks and deceitfulness, even to lies, to kill his own son. This is indeed the only shameful blemish that stains Rustam's long and illustrious life." Rustam's guile, in spite of its tragic consequence, is not equated with that of all men. It is not essentialized. It is presented as an antithesis of manliness. "Rustam," proposes the author, "kills his own son acting out of guile rather than manliness."[23] Guile, it seems, cannot be an inherently masculine quality.

Regardless of how we choose to define guile or frame it as admirable or reprehensible, Persian literature abounds in crafty men and women few of whom can match the creative deceptiveness of the nanny. (I am using "nanny" as a generic term referring to maidservants, slave girls, attendants, nurses, and wet-nurses.) A guileless nanny is a rarity, even an oxymoron, in classical Persian romances. She is the epitome of shiftiness, of disguise and impersonation. Over and over again, she is portrayed as a perpetrator of outright falsehood, a master of intrigues, "a marvel of deceit,"[24] "a woman steeped in magic arts, in spells, and wiles."[25] The nanny is cunning personified. She knows magic recipes and formulas. Through her witchcraft, she can control key characters. She can prepare love potions to captivate the heart of the man whose love the heroine desires. She can concoct aphrodisiacs. She can induce impotence. She can lie, cheat, steal, falsify, withhold vital information, slip in and out of the public arena without revealing her true identity. Unruly woman that she is, she can disrupt power relations. She can, in the words of Gurgani, assume "the nature of a fox in devising cunning ploys."[26] Tricky woman that she is, she can articulate and imaginatively act out the forbidden. Often, *Shaytan* looks like an amateur next to her. Here's how Ramin describes the quasi-magical power of the nanny:

> ... the task will be easy for you. By contriving men adapt mills to the wind; uproot the bed of a river; bring down birds from the heaven, bring

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21. *The Legend of Seyavash*, x.

22. *Yusuf wa Zulaykha*, 637.

23. Islami Nudushan, "Tragic Figures in Shahnameh," *Ettela'at*, December 3, 1997, 6.

24. Hakim Nizami, *Khusraw va Shīrīn* [Khusraw and Shirin] (Tehran: Elmi, 1934), 280.

25. *The Legend of Seyavash*, 22.

26. Fakhr al-Din Gurgani, *Vīs va Rāmīn*, ((Teheran: Zar, 1960 reprint), 105.

> fish out of the sea; lure raging lions to the trap, tie up wild elephants in chains; tempt snakes out of their holes, make them tame and playful by spells; cut a passage out through adamantine rock; level Mount Qaf to the plain. Now you know more spells than any; you can likewise contrive remedies; you have a store of more than a thousand spells; all your thoughts are ordered and collected; nothing emanates from you that is not worthy of approbation; there is none so clever as you. At the moment of speech you have a great lore in words; at the moment of action you have much store of talent.[27]

The nanny is indeed a major figure in classical Persian literature.[28] She appears with fascinating consistency as a stock character in most Persian romances.[29] Less constrained by laws of segregation than the heroine, she has easier access to the outside world.[30] Her lower social status affords her a certain

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27. Fakhr Ud-Din Gurgani, *Vis and Ramin*, Trans. George Morrison (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), 84.

28. Nannies appear frequently in contemporary women's writings. Taj-ol-Saltaneh, Simin Behbahani, Mahshid Amirshahi, Simin Daneshvar, among many others, have talked extensively about nannies. Their role, however, in this body of writings, is quite different from their function in classical romances. In modern literature, nannies are mainly upholders of the status quo. At times, they are negatively portrayed. For instance, even though Taj-ol-Saltaneh loved her nanny as a child, she came to believe that their close relationship blighted any chance for a close bond to develop between her mother and herself. *Khāṭirāt-i Tāj al-Saltanah* [Taj-ol-Saltaneh's Memoir], ed. Mansureh Ettehadiyeh and Sirus Sa'dvandiyan. (Teheran: Nashr-i Tarikh-i Iran, 1982), 115. Others have portrayed the nanny most lovingly. In an autobiographical sketch, Simin Behbahani writes: "Perhaps I owe this good health to the milk of that village wet-nurse who had two white, soft, warm udders instead of breasts, and nurtured me abundantly from those fountains of sweetness." *Nīmeh-ye Dīgar*, 2, no.1 (Autumn 1993): 169.

29. From antiquity to the Middle Ages, the figure of the nanny appears in many literary works in East and West. The Spanish *alcahueta*, the Indian *sakhi*, the Middle Eastern *ʿajūz*, (the crafty old woman in such popular tales as *The Thousand And One Nights* and *The Forty Parrots*), the European go-betweens not only create both thematic and narrative possibilities but also form a fascinating East/West link from the early 1300s on. Some of the most formative and vital characters in early western courtly literature depended on the nanny for the unraveling of the action. See Leyla Rouhi, "A comparative typology of the medieval go-between in light of Western-European, Near-Eastern, and Spanish cases." Ph.D. Dissertation, Harvard University, 1995.

30. Badr ol-Moluk Bamdad, in *From Darkness Into Light: Women's Emancipation in Iran*, talks about "brokeresses" and their role as "walking and talking newspapers." "The semi-imprisoned women, who had to stay in the house from dawn to dusk and seldom went out of doors, inevitably needed contacts with the outside world. These needs were met by brokeresses. . . . It was thanks to the brokeresses that the harem women could keep themselves quite well informed about events in the city and circumstances of other families. All considered, these walking and talking newspapers were a boon to the prisoners behind the harem walls." Trans. and ed. F.R.C. Bagley (New York: Exposition-University Book, 1977), 13.

mobility denied the high-born woman. Heroines, whose seclusion is the prerequisite of their charm and allure, borrow, as it were, their nannies' eyes, ears, tongues, hands, and feet. Working at the limits of a gendered, sexualized, and segregated world, neither entirely inside nor outside, the nanny figure lives on the borderlines, walks on the edges, oversteps frontiers. She is a border-transgressor. She trespasses the *ḥaram* (women's quarter), disregards the *ḥarīm* (protected space), has no respect for *ḥadd* (thresholds), performs the *ḥarām* (the forbidden), and violates territorial and social *ḥudūd* (proprieties). The nanny challenges cultural barriers and creates a space of possibilities. As a messenger, adviser, buffer, officer of misrule, mediator between the protagonists and the readers, she transgresses barriers—sexual and textual.

The nanny's counsel, her interference, and her disregard for boundaries are essential to the unfolding of such masterpieces as *Bakhtash va Rabīᶜa*, *Bījan va Manījah*, *Khusraw va Shīrīn*, *Rudābah va Zāl*, *Rustam va Tahmīnah*, *Shīrīn va Farhād*, *Vīs va Rāmīn*, *Yūsuf va Zulaykha*, among others. Even in popular romances such as *Amir Arsalān-i Rūmī*, *Dārāb-Nāmah*, *Iskandar-Nāmah*, *Fīrūz Shāh Nāmah*, and *Samak-i ᶜAyyār*, the heroine has the nanny as her double.[31] Together, they "are pairs which form fully rounded characters, each half being incomplete itself."[32] It is only in *Layla and Majnun* that the nanny plays no important role. Perhaps the setting of this love narrative, the Bedouin's desert, which might have been less segregated than the urban setting, can partly explain the nanny's absence. But more important is the plot itself, which is about separation rather than union. Love is never consummated in this most popular tale about love.

Why, we should ask ourselves, does the nanny appear and reappear in almost all love stories in classical Persian literature? Her presence in so many tales cannot be accidental. Indeed, more than just a recurring character, the nanny operates on several different levels and serves several indispensable functions. She crosses the lines of demarcation between inside and outside, right and wrong, permitted and forbidden. She serves as a go-between, a bridge between the lovers and also between the text and its audience. Her lower social status and, in some cases, her age afford her a certain mobility denied the high-born woman who remains confined in her enclave.

The idealized public invisibility of women in Iran extended beyond their immobilization behind walls and veils. It also affected their representation.[33] Just

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31. Nannies played important roles as patrons of art. As Annemarie Schimmel remarks "This brings us, perhaps indirectly, to the important role the wet-nurse played in Islamic history. Wet-nurses in imperial houses were frequently also distinguished patrons of the arts, and we need only think of the exquisite copy of the Quran, the so-called *muṣḥaf al-hadina*, that the nurse of the Zirid ruler in Tunisia contracted, or of the buildings in Lahore, Mandu, and other places founded by women in Muslim India. In Mandu, in fact, there is a very beautiful architectural compound dating back to the fifteenth century known as the "Resting Place of the Wet-Nurse's Little Sister." *My Soul Is a Woman* (New York: Continuum, 1997), 93.

32. William L. Hanaway, "Formal Elements in the Persian Popular Romances," *Review of National Literature*,. 2, no. 1 (Spring 1971): 158.

33. The Ottoman Sultan issued a decree in November 1900 banning the importation and sale of certain kinds of photographs. He specifically mentioned the follow-

as women's bodies and voices could not circulate freely in open space, neither could their images.[34] In other words, seclusion of women has had a powerful impact on Iranian narratives and narrative strategies. It has shaped the language, the themes, the plots, and the systems of representation used by both literary men and women. Traditionally, a virtuous woman was to maintain a closed-in existence that did not intrude on or merge with the outside world. She was a person of few transactions. She covered her body; guarded her honor; controlled her desires; measured her words; and unfailingly remained in her "proper place." The overwhelming majority of the heroines of classical Persian literature observed the laws of seclusion. Codes of ideal femininity, masculinity, and honor demanded the exclusion of women from the public arena.[35]

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ing kind of photographs: "bearing the names of God or Muhammad; pictures of the Kaaba or any other images relating to the holy city of Mecca; Muslim buildings and ceremonies; and portraits of women." Sarah Graham-Brown, *Images of Women* (London: Quartet, 1988), 45.

34. This invisibility, idealized or prescribed for women, is not confined to cinema or classical Persian literature. Its remnant can be witnessed in modern literature. The cloak of secrecy that traditionally has veiled women's literary representation can perhaps best be detected in the conspicuous absence of references to the wives/mothers/daughters/sisters of contemporary literary men. Although numerous fictional women populate modern Persian literature, women are barely referred to in men's biographies, autobiographies, or even personal interviews. Although two of Iran's prominent women writers, Simin Daneshvar and Simin Behbahani, have dedicated whole books, respectively entitled *Ghurūb-i Jalāl* (Jalal's Sunset) (Tehran: Ravaq, 1981) and *Ān Mard, Mard-i Hamrāham* (That Man, my Male Companion) (Teheran: Zavar, 1990) to portraying and immortalizing their husbands, to this day not a single book of this kind has been written by an Iranian man. Whereas the overwhelming majority of women's autobiographies focus on men (husbands, fathers, brothers, and sons), in the first-person narratives of male authors, women, if present at all, are often marginalized.

35. The portrayal of women in post-revolutionary cinema best demonstrates the impact of prohibitions on women's representation. Although women have begun to play a major role as actresses and directors, in the first few years after the revolution, principles of modesty had substantially reduced their role and their presence on the screen. According to Hamid Naficy, in "Veiled Vision/Powerful Presences: Women in Post-revolutionary Iranian Cinema," the most significant effect of these guidelines was "self-censorship of film-makers or avoidance altogether of stories involving women in order to evade entanglement with censors." (*In the Eye of the Storm*, ed. Mahnaz Afkhami and Erika Friedl [New York: Syracuse University Press, 1994], 146). The world of women was off-limits to spectators who "are considered to be unrelated (*nāmaḥram*) to the persons projected on the screen and thus must be treated as if they were present at the time of filming. This necessitates that women and men within the diegesis observe the rules of modesty and the codes of dress, gaze, and behavior not only in relationship to each other but also vis-à-vis the spectators. As unrelated spectators, film audiences cannot be privy to intimate moments between related males and females, such as exchange of amorous gazes and body contact (touching, hugging, or kissing). This forces the actors playing the parts of husband and wife, for example, in the privacy of their bedroom to behave as though they were not alone. It makes the private space public and renders modesty triumphant." (145)

Yet in spite of all the representational restrictions, in spite of the culturally sanctioned invisibility of women in the public arena and the centrality of women's chastity (secured and established through their unavailability), authors of numerous Iranian romances reconciled narrative needs with social proprieties. Persian romances abound in strong women protagonists who are not silenced, erased from the text, exiled to oblivion. On the contrary, they are given ample space and attention, key roles, and strong characters. They insist on and have claims to feelings and passion. They long for amorous adventures, take initiatives, refuse to be imprisoned in loveless relationships, demand autonomy. How are the demands of restricting women to the private domain reconciled with the demands of storytelling, especially love stories? If in the act of narration, the poet and the reader are always present and witnessing, how is a private experience—love—brought into the public arena—literature—without compromising the lovers, especially the woman? How are rules of seclusion and representational restrictions negotiated, revised, and suspended? I would like to suggest that the nanny, or to be more precise, the nanny's guile, is one of the literary tools that allows authors of Persian romances to circumvent literary restrictions.

The ideal of women's absence from the literary scene has had many repercussions for literary men.[36] Since public disclosure of a woman's life was considered an abuse of privacy and a violation of societal taboos, the authors of Iranian love narratives, who could not avoid women's presence in the text, had to follow a stringent code regulating women's representation. *Layla wa Majnun*, based on a legendary love story, best exemplifies the importance of observing this convention.[37] The story revolves around the love-madness of a certain poet named Qays who is in love with his childhood classmate, Layla, and sings her praise publicly. Layla, too, loves Qays although she is much more discreet. She had to be. For his indiscretion, for the many poems in which he praised her, for his public representational unveiling of the woman he loves, Qays is separated from her. Intoxicated with love to the point of insanity, hence his nickname, Majnun (the mad one), and sorrow-stricken by his forced separation from Layla, he leaves the company of men. After much agony and wandering, he dies, and is united with Layla only in death.

Majnun, this "poet whose pearls were offered in all the tents and bazaars,"[38] was plagued by his poetic talent or rather by his unconventional representation

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36. If men have had to follow a stringent code in representing women, women, until recently, were denied easy access to the power and privilege of publishing. The norms and values that regulated women's physical concealment applied equally to their literary representation and expression. Viewed as an act of unveiling, with the potential to enter the world of others, to establish communication, and to gain entrance into the public domain, publishing was for long construed as a masculine prerogative.

37. Many Iranian poets have recreated this legendary love story, "perhaps the most popular romance in the Islamic world. Versions appear in prose, song, and poetry in almost every language within the vast area stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Chinese border." Peter Chelkowski, *Mirror of the Invisible World: Tales from the Khamseh of Nizami* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1975), 66.

38. Ibid., 153.

of Layla in his poems. The cure—poetry—became his curse—the reason why he lost Layla. By publicly expressing love for an individualized woman, Majnun broke the covenant of secrecy. His verbal unveiling of Layla, his violation of the poetic and rhetorical conventions governing lyric poetry, cost him dearly. He lost her and his sanity.[39] It was the individualized, unformulaic nature of his poetry that stopped Layla's parents from consenting to the marriage. "Shall I sit with a vile versifier," says the father, "who has sullied my good name—and his own? There is not one corner in the whole of Arabia where my daughter's name is not bandied about on everyone's lips—and I should give her to him who is the cause of all this? My name would be infamous for ever."[40] And Majnun, whose poems were on everyone's lips, had to leave society in order to live and die with the wild animals of the desert. In his own words, "no veil covered my secret, / no ruins offered me a hiding place for my treasure; / that is why the world could rob me of it."[41]

Unlike Majnun, the authors of classical love narratives—and there are many of them—did not disregard literary restrictions regarding women's representation. They did not violate the commonly accepted literary norms. On the contrary, they depended on ingenious strategies to circumvent traditional spaces, boundaries, and limits. Some, for instance, imported their heroines from foreign lands. Shirin, the lofty heroine of Nizami's *Khusraw and Shīrīn*, is from Armenia; Zulaykha, the determined and lustful heroine of *Yūsuf and Zulaykha*, is from Western North Africa; Maryam, Khusraw's first wife in *Khusraw and Shīrīn*, is Byzantine; Farrokh Lagha is the daughter of Petros Shah-i Farangi (the European) in the popular romance, *Amīr Arsalān-i Rūmī*. Others converted their woman protagonists to Christianity or Zoroastrianism. The story of Sheik San^{c}an and the Christian girl, by Farid al-Din ^{c}Attar,[42] is one such example, *Vīs va Rāmīn*, by Fakhr ud-Din As^{c}ad Gurgani, composed around 1054 and deriving its plot from pre-Islamic sources, is another.[43]

How, we might ask, do the secluded women of classical Persian romances meet the man they eventually fall in love with? Some heroines see a portrait or a vision of the hero. Some hear rumors about him. Rudabah and Tahminah, for instance, heard about Rustam and Zal. Shirin saw the portrait of Khusraw.

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39. For a study of insanity as a masculine recourse, see Kaveh Safa, "Madness as Masculine Prerogative in *Layla and Majnun*," unpublished paper, presented in "Shifting Boundaries," at the University of Virginia, April 1995.

40. *Layla and Majnūn*, 81.

41. Ibid., 22.

42. For a translation of Farid al-Din ^{c}Attar's *Manṭiq al-Ṭayr*, written around 1177, see *The Conference of the Birds*, trans. Afkham Darbandi and Dick Davis (London: Penguin Books, 1984).

43. As Julie Scott Meisami mentions, Vis and Ramin "has acquired international repute as the Persian analogue of the story of Tristan and Yseult. The love triangle is substantially the same (an aging king, his young bride, and her lover—here, the king's brother)." *Medieval Persian Court Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 86.

Zulaykha glimpsed Yusuf for the first time in her dreams.[44] The beautiful maiden Bazigha, from the highest rank of an ancient line, heard a description of Yusuf and at once felt irresistibly attracted to him. In the words of Jami, one of the many authors of that most popular tale, *Yūsuf va Zulaykha*,[45] "Sight is not the only way that love finds into the heart: it often happens that this blessing is born of the spoken word, and that the echo of beauty entering the ear robs heart and soul of peace and reason."[46] Similarly, love is born through the spoken words in Khusraw who first heard about Shirin from his grandfather. He visited him in a dream and told him about the beautiful princess: "You shall have Shirin, your destined love, whose sweetness and beauty will sustain you all your days."[47] Ramin was assisted by the wind, an important mediator in many love stories.[48] "A fresh spring breeze arose and stirred the curtains on the litter one by one;" Gurgani tells us, "it was as if a sword had been drawn from the scabbard, or as if the sun had come out from behind a cloud. The face of Vis came out from behind the veil and Ramin's heart became its slave at one glance."[49]

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44. Dreams continue to function as pretext for love or union in the contemporary period as well. In *Nine Parts of Desire*, Geraldine Brooks writes: "Ruhollah, an impoverished clerical student from the dusty village of Khomein, had been twenty-seven when he asked for the hand of fifteen-year-old Khadija Saqafi. Her father, a prominent ayatollah (the word, meaning "reflection of God," is applied to the most learned of the Shiite clergy), didn't think much of the match. But Khadija felt differently. She had glimpsed her suitor when, wrapped in a chador, she brought him a glass of tea. She convinced her father to agree to the match after relating a dream in which the prophet proclaimed Ruhollah from Khomein as destined to become a great religious leader." (New York: Anchor Books, 1995), 15.

45. According to Gayane Karen Merguerian and Afsaneh Najmabadi, "The pervasive and multiple lives of the Yusuf and Zulaykha story in so many genres of Islamic literature (in the broadest meaning of that term) do not simply arise from its religious sanction and its Qur'anic power. On the contrary, the story draws its attraction in part from its ability to travel between genres, and, in its travels, moves from being a story of a prophet, to a story about the guile of women, to a love story, to a moral tale. Through its citation in the Qur'an; in the books of commentary, history, mythohistory, and ethics; in the mirror of princes; in love poetry; and in popular tales, it has come to saturate the cultural construction of gender in Islamic societies." "Zulaykha And Yusuf: Whose 'Best Story?" 487.

46. Hakim Nuruddin Abdulrahman Jami, *Yusuf and Zulaykha*, edited, abridged, and translated by David Pendlebury (London: Octagon Press, 1980), 55.

47. *Mirror of the Invisible World*, 22.

48. "There is a traditional story told about the love between the prophet Muhammad and Zainab, the most beautiful of his wives. A story born from a single look. Zainab was married to Zaid, the adopted son of the Prophet. One day, the latter needed to speak with Zaid. And so he approached his tent. Zainab told him that Zaid was not there. She hid herself behind a tapestry, but a 'gust of wind lifted the curtain' and the young woman, scantily dressed, became visible to Muhammad, who retired, distraught. Zaid then sets Zainab free again. But Muhammad will have to wait until a Koranic verse intervenes, making the union with a former wife of an adopted son legitimate." Assia Djebar, *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment*, trans. Marjolijn de Jager (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1992), 153, n. 3,.

49. *Vis and Ramin*, 60.

It is after this initial and ingeniously arranged encounter of the two lovers that the facilitating role of the nanny begins. She swings readily between two separate and separated arenas. She opens "closed doors." Listen to Ramin plead with her: "Of all my friends you are my stay and refuge, you my rescuer and deliverer. What matter if you act as a rescuer, deliver me from the clutch of ill fortune? Open the closed door before me, show me a way to the face of Vis."[50] The nanny has to open many closed doors behind which the heroines are secluded. One of the most compelling justifications for sex-segregation, a system based on the assumption that sexual desires are easily stimulated in both sexes, is women's sexual conduct. An old Persian saying compares the free mingling of men and women to the exposure of cotton to fire.[51] To assure their sexual integrity, to keep the fire from consuming the cotton, women are secluded—immobilized. Religious taboos are invoked to rationalize this immobilization. Mobility, highly valued and admired in men, is associated with sexual promiscuity in women. Congruently, *khiyābān-gard* (street-walker) and *harjā'ī* (literally, belonging or existing everywhere] have become synonymous with prostitution when applied to women. *Gumrāh kardan* and *az rāh bi-dār burdan*, mean "to lead astray" and imply "to seduce."[52] Women's chastity, it seems, is inextricably linked with space, with staying on the designated path, with immobility.

In a famous scene in the *Shāhnāmah*, often illustrated in miniature paintings, Tahminah, while professing her love and devotion to the hero Rustam, is quick to remind him of her confinement behind walls, hence her chastity:

> Outside these walls, there's none who's looked on me.
> Nor has my voice been heard by any ear.
> From everyone have I heard tales of you—
> so wonderful they seemed to me like myths.
> . . .
> I'm yours now should you want me, and, if not,
> None but the fish and birds will see my face.[53]

Tahminah's double message of chastity and sexual passion combines both the fears and the fantasies of her male author/reader. Her passion is all the more appealing because of her modesty. Shirin, this well-educated, independent, resourceful, and fearless woman, is also the idealization of womanly chastity,

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50. Ibid., 83.

51. Yusuf, tricked into a meeting with Zulaykha, the woman who passionately loves him, implores her to let him go. "It distresses me," he tells her, "to be alone with you and hidden from view; for you are a blazing fire, and I am a wisp of dry cotton." *Yūsuf wa Zulaykhā*, 80.

52. Etymologically, in English too, seduction denotes "to lead astray." The idealization of women's immobility seems not to be the monopoly of any one culture.

53. Ferdowsi, *The Tragedy of Sohrab and Rustam*, trans. Jerome Clinton, (Seattle & London: University of Washington Press, 1987), 17.

purity, and loyalty.[54] Although dressed like a male warrior while riding towards Persia in search of her beloved prince, still she swore "by the seven heavens, that even if she wept tears of blood for love of Khusraw, she would not be his until she was his wife."[55] Even Zulaykha, after years of marriage to ᶜAziz of Egypt, is a virgin when she is reunited with the man she so desired. Upon entering their nuptial chamber, Yusuf finds her, to his absolute delight, a virgin, "her jewel box" untouched.[56] Though married twice, Vis, too, is still a virgin when she falls in love with Ramin. In the words of Gurgani: "the seal of God" was "yet intact upon her." Not only the houris in Islamic paradise have a renewable virginity.[57] For various convenient reasons, Vis's marriages to Viru and King Mowbad—her two previous husbands—were never consummated.[58] "As he pranced in the lists of happiness," Gurgani tells us, "he put the key of desire in the lock of happiness: his delight in the lover grew the more when he saw the seal of God was as yet intact upon her. He pierced that soft pearl of great price; seduced a saint from her virginity."[59]

None of these heroines is the "spoiled" goods of another man, none has been involved in a previous carnal union. Virginity is presented, time and again, as a "jewel" sought by men, a "pearl" pierced by men, a "treasure box" appropriated by men. It is a "seal of God," a prerequisite for entering the arena of classical Persian literature as a heroine. To qualify, even previously married women had to be "cleansed" of any physical trace of earlier sexual experience. Virgins they had to be. And "virgins" they were. For transgressing these codes, for indulging in forbidden love, women would pay dearly. The story of the two queens married to Shahriyar and Shahzaman in *The Thousand and One Nights* is exemplary. When Shahriyar, upon the advice of his brother, conceals himself behind a curtain and sees for himself the Queen's adulterous relationship with the slave, Masᶜud, he not only decapitates her and her lover, but also becomes thereafter a serial killer of virgin girls after deflowering them.

Aware of the price for discovered illicit affairs, the nanny violates territorial and social proprieties to bring lovers safely together. She uses all her tricks—and she seems to need an abundant supply of them—to arrange their meetings. Ramin, desperate to meet with Vis, tells the nanny: "Recite my message to that

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54. Vahid Dastegerdi, an authority on Nizami, calls *Khusraw and Shirin* "the best historical tale of love and chastity," *Mirror of the Invisible World*, 48.

55. Ibid., 31.

56. *Maṣnavī-yi Haft Awrang*, 727.

57. Houris, literally, "girls with big, black eyes," are promised to the male believers who enter paradise. See the Qurᵓan: 44:54; 52:20; 55:72; and 56:22.

58. It is interesting to note that both Vis and Zulaykha, two women full of love, lust, and rebellion in classical Persian literature, never consented to their weddings. True, Zulaykha wants to marry ᶜAziz of Egypt. But from the beginning he is an unfortunate substitute for Yusuf. It is in search of the apparition in her dream that Zulaykha goes to Egypt and ends up marrying ᶜAziz, by mistake and force of circumstances. Vis, too, marries King Mowbad because her mother promised her to him. As a matter of fact, the king first proposes to the mother, who did not want to marry him. Vis is her unfortunate substitute.

59. *Vīs va Rāmīn*, 111.

beauty of jasmine-scented bosom; do not make excuses to me any further; as long as I live, my nurse, I shall not let my hand fall from the hem of your garment. Even if you cut me to pieces with the sword I shall not seek remedy from any besides you. Even if you drive me away a hundred times my hope in you will only increase. You know how to remedy my pain, how to feel for this wounded, helpless creature."[60] Well-versed in matters of love, the nanny could win over the most recalcitrant lover. She claimed and used extraordinary powers. After seeing Zulaykha distraught and almost deranged with love, the nanny comes to her rescue. In her own words: "If it is an angel from the heavens, whose essence is formed from the sacred light, I shall invoke him by praise and prayer to come below; if he is a son of the fairies of the woods and the mountains, then we shall have to conjure him up with an incantation. And if he is a mere mortal, you shall presently have joy of him: even if he should not wish for union with you, you shall be his mistress not his slave."[61]

The nanny not only functions as a messenger but also serves as borrowed eyes. When Yusuf is in prison and Zulaykha can't see him, "Repeatedly she would send a trusted maidservant to Yusuf, loaded with delicacies, so that her maid could gaze on his face in her stead. When she returned, Zulaykha would shower her with loving caresses; for were these not the eyes that had seen his face, the feet that had walked up to him? Then she would fire anxious questions about him: were his beauty and health still unimpaired? Did he touch the food which had been sent to him? Did he ever remember Zulaykha, who had given her heart to him?"[62] Zulaykha borrows not only her nanny's eyes, but her voice as well, even asking her to be her tongue. "You are a constant consolation to me; you have come to my aid a hundred times. Have pity on my doleful state and help me one more time: Go to him for me: be my tongue, and take him this message for me."[63]

Nothing can stop the nanny in her mission. In an almost farcical scene, she takes the place of Vis in Mowbad's bed so that Vis can be with Ramin. The loyal nanny dutifully slips into the husband's bed. He is too drunk to know the difference between his wife and her substitute. Not until the following morning, while holding the wrinkled hands of the old woman, does Mowbad realize what has happened. He "thunders like a cloud from the rage in his heart. He grabbed the hand of that witch and said, what demon are you that are clasped in my embrace? Who threw you in my arms?" Meanwhile Vis, who was "laying lip on lip, face on face" with Ramin all night, returns in time to save the trapped nanny. "You have hurt my hand from clutching it and pressing it so," she said to the angry husband. 'Take the other hand for a time and then take it where you will.' When the King heard the voice of the idol-faced beauty he was unaware of her redoubtable ruse; he let fall the nurse's hand from his and released that harlot from the net of shame."[64] Shirin, too, who finds Khusraw drunk on their nuptial

60. *Vīs va Rāmīn*, 83.

61. Ibid., 18.

62. Ibid., 106.

63. Ibid., 66.

64. Ibid., 153.

night after having enjoined him not to drink, sends the nanny, dressed in her garments, to Khusraw. Unlike Mowbad, however, Khusraw knew the difference immediately and could not be fooled. "He was sober enough to know / that a spring quail moves more gracefully than this."[65]

Not only does the nanny bring the lovers together, she also bursts out of the norms and the narrative niches meant to contain and segregate women. She is the bridge between lovers and also between the text and its audience. She mediates between the heroine and the readers, transporting them into the women's quarter and into the minds and hearts of its residents. Between that closed universe and the readers stood walls, veils, codes of segregation, and representational interdictions. The nanny unlocks the forbidden space where women's spirit and speech soar free. Through her, the territory that lies beyond sexual and textual constraints becomes accessible.

To ensure woman's chastity, her voice was kept out of the public domain. Actually, silence became the verbal counterpart of her chastity. Considered part of a woman's *ʿawrat* (pudenda), her voice was subject to prohibitions. A cloak of secrecy not only covered her body, it also concealed her public voice. Her tongue, like her body, was surrounded by prohibitions and precautions. Exposure of either was considered a transgression, outside the bounds of allowable discourse. Both were exiled, for long years, to the realm of the private. So cherished was a woman's silence that it became a key criterion of her beauty and desirability—a prerequisite of the ideal woman. A long-tongued woman (*zan-i zabān-i darāz*), one who had no control over her tongue, one who allowed it to wander in all directions, was the ultimate opposite of the ideal woman. No wonder that for centuries, ideal women were frequently portrayed as the rose, the candle, the silent object of love rather than as active, articulate agents. She was the candle, he the moth. She was the rose, he the nightingale who sang (even in pain). He was the lover, she the beloved.

Observant of the conventions and codes of female expression in public, heroines of Iranian romances combine public self-consciousness and private self-watchfulness. When Tahminah enters Rustam's bedroom to declare her love, she immediately asserts that "Outside these walls, there's none who's looked on me / Nor has my voice been heard by any ear."[66] Tahminah wants Rustam to know that her voice, like her body, has been enclosed, covered by silence, concealed. It has not freely circulated in the public domain. While allowing Tahminah to give body to her voice and voice to her body, Firdawsi creates a utopian space for her, where she can be free to express her love and still retain her social chastity. In other words, even in potentially compromising scenes, such as this one between Tahminah and Rustam, the verbal "openness" of the heroine, her love and lust, are circumscribed. Her verbal "nakedness" is an indispensable and admissible incursion of the private into the public. It is an irruption into an otherwise interdicted space. Neither the privacy of that space nor the codes of women's modesty are challenged.

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65. Nizami Ganjavi, *Khusraw va Shīrīn*, ed. Vahid Dastegerdi (Tehran: ʿIlmi, 1934), 389.

66. *The Tragedy of Sohrab and Rustam*, 17.

Women's public declaration of passion was not readily acceptable, much less encouraged. It was often associated with promiscuity. Women—the respectable kind—should not openly address lyrical or sexual issues. Even if they had to treat such matters, they should do so allusively and camouflage them with formulas, metaphors, symbols. Shame, dishonor, even death were the fate of those who openly spoke of love and desire. Even Zulaykha, the passionate woman who seized every opportunity to be united with the man she loved, is marked by her silence in the public arena. In the words of her most admiring creator, Jami, "her lips, bud-like, had the seal of silence upon them. . . . For months, for years even," Zulaykha divulged her love to no one. She "would tell the flowers of her secret love and the burning grief in her heart. Sometimes she would rush like a torrential stream, headlong to the Nile to pour out her sorrows." Or else, like Layla, she would choose the wind as her confidant, her favored audience:

> Dear wind! You that rise at dawn and shed musky fragrance on the bosom of the jasmine, and cause the moist tresses of the hyacinth to caress the petals of the rose; you that shake the tiny, bell-like leaves hanging from the branches, and make the trees sway with their feet rooted in the soil; you that carry messages between lover and beloved, soothing their distressed and agitated hearts! In all the world there is no one more doleful and desolate than I am. Console my afflicted heart, and help me to bear my bitter sorrow.[67]

Although Persian love narratives are "public" in that they are published and available to a general readership, women's discourses are presumably not designed for the readers reception. Given to the wind, to the river, to dandelions, to patient stones, or to the nanny, their recipient is nobody and everybody at the same time.

Heroines, whose silence and discretion were the heart of their charm and allure, confided in their nannies. Though their absence from and silence in the public arena were their hallmarks, heroines talked privately to their nannies. Mainly through the nanny are feminine desires and erotic experiences revealed. It seems as if the readers borrow the nannies' ears to hear these otherwise private conversations. In one of the most beautiful love stories in *Shāhnāmah* Rudabah, upon hearing a description of the hero Zal, falls madly in love with him. She summons her five nannies, confides in them, and asks them to unite her with the man she so desires. Only through the textual mediation of the nannies do we learn of Rudabah's otherwise secret love:

> To you alone the secret of my heart
> I now unfold; to you alone confess
> the deep sensations of my captive soul.
> I love, I love; all day and night of him
> I think alone I see him in my dreams—
> You only know my secret—and now

67. *Yūsuf wa Zulaykhā*, 38.

soothe the sorrow of my bursting heart.[68]

Even Vis, the unaccommodating woman who challenged the established order of her society at its most intimate and personal level, relied heavily on the figure of the nanny to reveal her feelings and divulge her secrets. "Away from everyone she would secretly say to the nanny, 'My chaotic fortune has fallen about my ears, made my heart weary of life, pulled up the very root of its happiness.'"[69]

Readers not only borrow the nanny's ears to gain access to secrets, but also her eyes to enter forbidden zones. The nanny makes the women's quarter an open space for the free movement of the gaze. In a culture where seeing has highly charged meanings, where eyes are subject to the strictest regulations, where a "man can do as much damage to a woman's honor with his eyes as if he were to seize hold of her with his hands,"[70] and in the words of Ghazali, the renowned theologian of the Abbasid age, "the look is fornication of the eye,"[71] this voyeurism has a complex, layered significance. "How to look and how to be looked at are the object of a precise, meticulous apprenticeship that is an integral part of the socialization of the Muslim. To be a Muslim is to control one's gaze and to know how to protect one's own intimacy from that of others."[72]

Looking is no longer a violation, a sin, a visual rape in these love narratives. There is no penalty, no stigma attached. The gaze is uncontrolled, free to roam about, liberated from cultural restrictions. Here, the observed /the imagined/the fantasized does not block the gaze. Here, readers can go beyond walls or veils. Although a clear distinction is made between the private and the public, between the inner and the outer, through the mediation of the nanny, forbidden territories can be traversed. In classical Persian literature, many scenes masterfully play with concealment and disclosure and invite the gaze. If ordinarily the gaze of the intruder is blocked from the women's quarters, the fictive world of many romances opens them to satisfy the scopic desires. The rhetoric of inaccessibility seems to stimulate the desires to transgress sacrosanct boundaries. Some of these scenes have become favorite motifs in Iranian pictorial arts.

Voyeurs are not only one of the most common features in miniaturists' illustrations of manuscripts, they also reside in Persian romances. One popular theme, depicted by various artists, shows Khusraw watching Shirin bathe in a stream. Believing herself protected, unaware of peeping Toms, a disrobed Shirin suddenly notices a man staring at her. As soon as she notices the intruder, she covers her nakedness with her long, flowing hair. Although Khusraw averts his gaze immediately thereafter, still he has seen her naked. But Khusraw is not alone in his position of voyeur. The reader, too, is stealing a glance and sharing

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68. Firdawsi, *The Shah Nameh of the Persian Poet Firdausi*, trans. James Atkinson, Esq. (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1976), 56.

69. *Vīs va Rāmīn*, 70.

70. Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond The Veil* (New York: Schenkman, 1975), 83.

71. Ibid., 83.

72. Abdelwahab Bouhdiba, *Sexuality in Islam*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 37.

the moment. Khusraw watches Shirin. Viewers watch Khusraw watch Shirin and share his voyeuristic position.

If readers and narrators are not positioned as hidden voyeurs in romantic Persian narratives, they often rely on the nanny to gain access to forbidden territories. By opening the doors, by unlocking the locks, by lifting the curtains, the nanny allows the reader and the poet to gaze upon a cloistered space—a site both near and distant, sheltered and exposed, at the same time. The heroine remains in her protected, domestic space, and poet and readers alike are allowed to contemplate this prohibited arena. The heroine is thus covered and discovered all at once. The "inner sanctum," though opened up by literary devices, remains enclosed within the framework of the story. Although the readers along with the poet have entered its private space, they are kept at a safe distance so that the heroines can become visible without being violated. It is made abundantly clear that this private space is inaccessible to the public within the fictive setting. Perhaps Jami's seemingly obsessive effort to keep Zulaykha's declaration of love invisible and inaudible is a good case in point. Leading Yusuf to a labyrinth with secret alcoves, many hidden doors, and numerous locks and bolts, Zulaykha selects a space enclosed many times over. It is only when they reach the deepest recess of this private space that she attempts to seduce Yusuf.

> The eloquent narrator of this mystical tale now reveals that when they reached the seventh chamber, Zulaykha uttered a cry of distress from the depths of her soul: "Oh, Yusuf, I beg you, for pity's sake step into my magnificent sanctuary!"
>
> She led him into that delightful apartment, and locked the door with an iron bolt and a golden chain. It was an inner sanctum, closed to all outsiders: not even her friends had any hope of access to it. There was only room in it for lover and beloved—the beloved's cheeks glowing with bewitching coyness, the lover's heart beating time to the melody of passion, the way wide open to voluptuous, soul-inflaming desire.[73]

In the gilded palace for the construction of which Zulaykha had to spend "gold and silver by the camel-load," in its seventh chamber, behind several doors locked with iron bolts and golden chains, there is a sense of dramatic moment that could change the course of the relationship. We are at a nodal point in the unfolding of Zulaykha's saga. Tempted briefly, Yusuf eventually chooses to leave. We see him exiting the sanctuary not in the resplendent blush of post-coital bliss, but angry and harassed. He "ran as fast as he could. Each door opened in front of him, without any need for a key: the bolts simply flew aside."[74] Even Zulaykha's locks and bolts are no good. Although the author conspires with Yusuf and lets him run miraculously through all those elaborately locked doors without any need for a key, still the scene is constructed on a system of voyeuristic pleasure and the reader has to assume the position of a voyeur entering a labyrinthian scene and a private space.

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73. *Yūsuf va Zulaykha*, 81.

74. *Yūsuf va Zulaykha*, 86.

This game of concealment and disclosure, of eavesdropping, of crossing boundaries, of entering a private space "closed to all outsiders" provokes the desire to hear and to look. It invites the gaze and fantasies of the reader—the hidden voyeur. It satisfies the pleasure of listening to and looking at a forbidden, private zone. It makes the women's quarter, this mysterious and mystified space, this eroticized arena, the site for the projection of sexual fantasies, an open space for the free movement of the gaze. And it does so without ever compromising the heroines who conform to ideals of seclusion within the framework of the tale itself. Although physically, verbally, and metaphorically unveiled, although seemingly unmindful of peeping eyes and listening ears, still these sexually assertive, self-willed, and uninhibited heroines are, through narrative devices, neither promiscuous nor fallen. Their desire is not untamed, but controlled. It is circumscribed by cultural and literary conventions. Poet and male readers penetrate the "interior space" of a women's quarter, without challenging the necessity of such segregating mechanisms and devices. These sanitized and sanctified scenes do not arouse public indignation. In fact, they open a utopian space for women to express their feelings of love and lust.

In the gendered and segregated world of Persian romances, without the nanny's many intercessions those love stories could not have unfolded. Acting as a mediator between the lovers and, more significantly, between the readers and the women's quarters, the nanny also intercedes between desire and fulfillment, between two opposing, almost irreconcilable, concepts of ideal femininity and womanhood, between fictional demands and social proprieties for a woman. She serves as the heroine's double, her shadow, the personification of unacceptable behavior by the heroine but without which the plot could not unfold. She complies with her assigned role as the counter-ideal, the witch, the beguiling transgressor, so that the heroine remains "good" and the author recreates the polarized notion of womanhood as good and bad.

Both in life and literature, nannies upheld and subverted social conventions. Although they helped modify the strict codes of sex segregation that governed relationships between men and women, they neither challenged them, nor questioned the gendered allocation of space. They did not question the existing sexual arrangement. In fact, they maintained the division of space into private sphere for women, public sphere for men. All these romances after all reinscribe the centrality of the heterosexual couple. Marriage provides the narrative closure for the vast majority of them, while modesty and domesticity remain the central tenet of their dominant value system. Even such lustful women as Zulaykha and Vis are ultimately transformed to embody the subjugation of "sin" and lust to penance and channeled and restrained sexuality. The future of all these heroines remains with their families. Their ultimate role is that of wife and mother. Their love-affairs were simply an interlude. In other words, the license accorded the nanny did not undermine the status quo. It allowed the authors of romances to explore and portray passionate relationships. These clever and mobile women made the plot plausible and possible. The figure of the nanny is thus an expression of and a release for contradictions within the system. Although within the stories she does not question the basic order of the society itself, she manages to overstep boundaries. Although she helps preserve the status quo, she also sanctions and even promotes disobedience and temporary immunity from traditional rules of

modesty. She becomes a vehicle for both regulating and freeing love and the imagination, for confirming the codes of segregation as well as resisting them. In her highly ordered and hierarchical society, the nanny operates as a non-disruptive boundary-crosser. She acts as both guardian and mediator. She mocks and yet reinforces. She honors the system even as she betrays it. She is dangerous and safe at the same time.

In spite of their central role, nannies have no names of their own. They are excluded from the world of personal naming. The need to individualize them is overshadowed by their function as stock characters. Their labels locate and anchor them in a relational system in which their role rather than their individual distinctiveness matters. What eventually happens to these messengers and facilitators of love after the message is delivered and the meeting accomplished we do not know. Once their mission is completed, their lives are unimportant and unrecorded. They have no other function and can be disposed of. They quickly become superfluous and disappear into silence and oblivion, exiled from the text and the story. Perhaps their erasure from the narrative is the price they have to pay for having redeemed women from silence and invisibility. Perhaps we need another intermediary, another voyeur, the ultimate go-between, so that the nanny herself can be redeemed. Or perhaps her final scheme is to survive between the lines in spite of her forced banishment from the scene. And indeed the nanny has cunningly created for herself a safe space. She is alive and well and indispensable for Persian love narratives.

Just as Eve's presumed guile allowed Adam to discover his virility, the nanny's seemingly everlasting supply of schemes allows the authors of classical Persian romances to achieve their literary goals. Although she remains the treacherous saboteur of morality, in none of these stories, does she seem to derive any long term benefit for herself. Her interferences are not in the pursuit of financial gains, material advantages, job promotions. Her guile does not serve her own self-interest. It is not self-centered. It is not generated by self-representational or self-promotional designs. It does not even bring her esteem or respect. On the contrary, often she is subjected to harsh criticism, embarrassment, harassment, even beatings. The nanny's guile does not serve herself. It is well suited—indeed indispensable—to the generic requirements of these love narratives and their structural needs. Thanks to her, or rather thanks to her guile, author, reader, and lovers journey, on the wings of words, through forbidden spheres and fantasies.

In spite of their key roles and their indispensable services, nannies have been neglected in critical studies in Persian literature.[75] The subtle attempts of the nanny to mingle categories, to cross the rigid divide of gender, and to suggest—even if with tongue in cheek—that change is necessary in the gendered categories and spaces, have been neglected. The nanny is a fascinating character

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75. In *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Stallysbra and White question Freud's conspicuous neglect of nannies and other female servants in the sexual development of his upper-class subjects. They suggest that nannies and maids, because they represent the forbidden "lowly" realms of the body and the lower classes, are dangerously seductive and are thus "contained," almost dissolved, by being seen as a displacement of the mother. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986)

in her own right. Whether motivated by devotion (for the heroine) or by some unacknowledged resistance within, she is a brave, adventurous woman. She is a pioneer and explorer who ventures into forbidden territories. By imagining the unimaginable, she creates real-life and literary, sexual and textual, possibilities. She is the worldly wise who is more interested in mediation and conflict resolution than in wars, in fights, in violent solutions. Viewed from this perspective, the nanny is wise rather than sly, altruistic rather than cunning, an enabler rather than a cheat, a clever trickster rather than tricky. As the ultimate mediator, she reminds us that the line of demarcation between craft and crafty, between art and artifice, can be a thin one indeed.